# *A* Javanese View on America in the 60s: Umar Kayam and the Manhattan Stories

**Paulus Sarwoto**
Department of English Language Studies Graduate Program
Universitas Sanata Dharma, Indonesia
Email: sar@usd.ac.id

**Abstract:** The Manhattan stories, consisting of six short stories written by an Indonesian vernacular author Umar Kayam, reflect a Javanese view on American life during the 1960s. Kayam's stay in the US in the early 1960s as a graduate student provides the material for his writings. While he tends to view the dark sides of American capitalism, materialism, and individualism, his reflection on his own Javanese values is more positive. His narratives seem to consider that the agrarian life of Java in the 1960s provides a healthier and more secure social cohesion where individuals can relate to each other in a more humane way, unlike the American characters that are depicted as being lonely, fragile, without social cohesion, and criminal.

**Key words:** Occidentalism, *priyayi*, postcolonial, capitalism, materialism, individualism

http://dx.doi.org/10.15519/dcc.2018.01.8.1.11

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the works of an Indonesian vernacular poet, Umar Kayam's Manhattan stories.[1] Kayam's first story, "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan" (A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan) was first published in an Indonesian literary magazine, *Horizon*, in 1966. His Manhattan stories: "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan", "Istriku, Madame Schiltz dan sang Raksasa" (My Wife, Madame Schlitz and the Monster), "Sybil", "Secangkir Kopi dan Sepotong Donat" (A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut), "Chief Sitting Bull" and "There Goes Tatum", were published in one book titled *Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan* (1972). They have been translated by Harry Aveling in *Sri Sumarah and*

---

[1] Umar Kayam was an Indonesian poet and university professor who was born in East Java in 1932. He was one of a few poets experiencing four different education systems through four different time frames: colonial Dutch and Japanese (primary and secondary), independent (tertiary) and the US (graduate). Kayam's first story, "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan" (A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan) was first published in an Indonesian literary magazine, Horizon, in 1966. His longer short stories, "Sri Sumarah" and "Bawuk" were published together in one book in 1975. His New York stories, "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan," "Istriku, Madame Schiltz dan sang Raksasa" (My Wife, Madame Schlitz and the Monster), "Sybil," "Secangkir Kopi dan Sepotong Donat" (A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut), "Chief Sitting Bull" and "There Goes Tatum," were published in one book titled *Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan* (1972). His other stories, "Musim Gugur Kembali ke Connecticut" (Fall in Connecticut) and "Kimono Biru buat Istri" (The Blue Kimono) were compiled with the Manhattan stories, as well as "Sri Sumarah" and "Bawuk," in a collection *Sri Sumarah dan Cerita Pendek Lainnya* (1986). The same collection was translated in English by Harry Aveling in a collection of short stories titled *Sri Sumarah and other Stories* (1976). Kayam's other collection of stories are *Parta Krama* (1997) and *Lebaran di Karet, di Karet …* (*Eid al-Fitr at Karet, at Karet …*) (2002). Kayam also wrote two novels, *Para Priyayi* (*The Nobles*) (1992) and *Jalan Menikung: Para Priyayi 2* (*The Winding Road: The Nobles 2*) (1999).

*Other Stories* (1980). The English translation of the stories referred to in this article is the one done by Harry Aveling.

These short stories reflect Kayam's views as a Javanese *priyayi* (noble) living in the U.S. on domestic and foreign social phenomena that he encountered while staying in a culture very different from his own in the early 1960s. In other words, these short stories may be read as a perspective of the East on the West – which is often referred to as Occidentalism. I will divide the discussion in this chapter into two parts: elaborating the perspective of the stories on the root of American evils and the absurdity of racial categorization. Since the Manhattan stories in general view the West through the eyes of a Javanese *priyayi*, it would be worth exploring how this cultural translation is achieved and what kind of untranslatability might have been left. I am particularly interested in Kayam's figuration of subaltern characters in these stories. This reflects how Kayam positioned himself as an outsider here, while in his later works he tries to reposition himself as *priyayi* in his own society.

Ignas Kleden (1998: 135) argues that Kayam's early works, including the Manhattan stories, are better than his later works, such as *Para Priyayi* and *Jalan Menikung*. His later works are considered by Kleden to be more 'typological' and less literary. Without necessarily agreeing with Kleden, it is still worth noting the amount of positive commentary these short stories have attracted. Other critics such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma (Faruk 1998: 213-22) and Nirwan Dewanto (Faruk 1998: 270-75) praise these earlier works as having extraordinary observations to make about seemingly ordinary incidents in the Western setting. In addition, these works are considered more literary because they reflect Kayam's ability to separate his duality as a poet and a social scientist.

These works also show Kayam's special ability to bring out specific atmospheres very strongly through narration. Technically speaking, these six stories are Kayam's masterpieces because he succeeded in creating strong characters – characters who speak and act based on some sufficient plausible reasons. These early writings seem to be modelled after a number of American writers. For example, Harry Aveling (2005: 89) mentions that the style of the stories is influenced by that of Carson McCullers, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Salinger and Bellow. With this Western style of writing, Kayam depicts the West with his Javanese cultural consciousness of things.

From a postcolonial perspective, the Manhattan stories are very intriguing to observe. Of course, Kayam was not the first to depict the West from an outsider's perspective; such works had already made a substantial impact well before Kayam wrote the stories. Many 'third world' writers, such as Aimé Césaire, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe had written with a similar perspective. The difference is that Kayam observes a West that is not his former colonizer's country (which in this case would be the Netherlands), but the US. Since independence it has been the US rather than the Netherlands that has provided more opportunities for Indonesians to pursue their higher education through US government-sponsored scholarships, as Kayam was doing when he wrote these stories.

## 2. The Roots of the American Evil: Capitalism, Materialism, and Individualism

Many of the Manhattan stories seem to be highly critical of American

life and habits, and indeed focus on the evils of Manhattan and New York life, that is, on the roots of evil which Kayam identifies as being capitalism, materialism, and individualism. But the focus of the stories should not be understood as meaning that Kayam has a monolithic view of Western modernism. In other words, as a social scientist, he must have been aware that capitalism, materialism, and individualism are not the sole properties of the West or that they are not always negative. However, a writer is not always in control of his text. The intended meaning and the conscious level of the text sometimes betray what lies beyond, i.e. the unconscious level of the text. It is in this unconscious meaning of the text that the residues of Occidentalism[2] usually lurk between the lines because

> [far] from being the dogma favoured by downtrodden peasants, Occidentalism more often reflects the fears and prejudices of urban intellectuals, who feel displaced in a world of mass commerce (Buruma 2004: 30).

In this respect, despite Kayam's intellectual modernity, there remain some essentialist undertones in the ways in which these stories define the West as being opposed to his Javanese value system. The identification of capitalism, materialism, and individualism at the heart of Manhattan life are a part of Kayam's, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's term, strategic

---

[2] Occidentalism can be seen as having the same pattern of claim as Orientalism, only this time it is from the perspective of the East. The West and its modernity are seen as "inhuman, a zoo of depraved animals, consumed by lust" (Buruma 2004: 22).

essentialism to describe what the West is.

The conflict developed in the short stories, which is usually deeply concealed, is rooted in a variety of representations of these three aspects of life in the metropolis. Although they have two opposing faces of both good and evil, Kayam is more interested in the evil side. Therefore, capitalism and materialism are portrayed especially vividly in the characters' strong attachment to money, which represents prosperity. The other evil, individualism, is seen in the characters' desperate loneliness and sometimes absurd efforts to relate to other humans. These issues are the basis upon which Kayam develops his plot and themes about the moral hazards of Western modernity as his stories circle around the problems of loneliness, sexual licentiousness, alcoholism, crime, and domestic violence. Each of the stories looks at a different combination of these problems and in the following sections I will discuss how each story explores those problems.

### 2.1. "A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan"

The main figure in the first of Kayam's stories, Jane, can be assumed to be a white female American woman. She is in a romantic affair with Marno, a Javanese *priyayi* studying in the US. Jane and Marno are desperately lonely as can be inferred from their futile dialogues that lead them nowhere. They argue whether the colour of the moon is yellow or purple and other topics that do not relate to one another. Their dialogues therefore do not build up toward a coherent idea. This reminds one of the theatre of the absurd, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which the dialogue is not arranged climatically but is intended more to portray a futile and desperate lack of purpose.

On the surface, the story does not deal with racial issues as would be common in many postcolonial stories. Jane and Marno can relate to each other without any apparent racial sentiment being involved and they seem to be on equal footing. At a second layer of meaning, however, the futile and lonely dialogue evokes Kayam's Javanese cultural consciousness in regard to the life style of the inhabitants of New York.

The setting of the story is in an upper middle-class apartment in Manhattan. Kayam's Javanese background is consciously evoked through his narrator's description of the life style and luxury of the place and the city. Although he also comes from an upper middle-class family, Manhattan certainly presents a quite different kind of luxury from his Javanese village.

Secondly, Jane's loneliness while living in her own cultural community is unusual for Kayam's Javanese view because she is supposed to be within her own network of social and familial connections. Loneliness as understood in Javanese spirituality is even a medium to achieve spiritual enlightenment. However, when situated in a culture quite remote from his own, Marno also becomes lonely. Thus, are depicted as experiencing this alienation for different reasons.

Jane and Marno's reactions to this loneliness show contrast to their different cultural backgrounds. Initially they think that their love affair will dull their loneliness, but from their dialogues we learn that this loneliness always lingers in every word they utter. The more they talk the lonelier is the atmosphere created. Upon seeing New York night lights that remind him of the thousands of fireflies he used to see in his village in Java, Marno realizes that this affair goes against his Javanese consciousness. A sexual affair, seen from the perspective of Javanese

*priyayi* values, is more like a temporary diversion than a continuing path. It is a temporary game after which a Javanese man will return to his wife with regrets. Marno therefore kindly returns the pyjamas that Jane specially bought for him and refuses Jane's invitation to spend the night with her. The sight of the fireflies has knocked his Javanese senses into him and he returns to his own moral value system. Jane, on the other hand, is described as turning to alcohol and sleeping pills to dull her pain:

> *Kemudian pelan-pelan diciumnya dahi Jane, seperti dahi itu terbuat dari porselin. Lalu menghilanglah Marno di balik pintu, langkahnya terdengar sebentar dari dalam kamar turun tangga.*
> *Di kamarnya, di tempat tidur, sesudah minum beberapa butir obat-tidur Jane merasa bantalnya basah* (Kayam 1986: 167-68).

> He kissed her gently on the forehead as though she were made of porcelain. Then he left. His footsteps sounded down the stairs for a few minutes. In her room, in bed, after taking a few sleeping-tablets, Jane noticed that her pillow was wet (Kayam 1986: 8).

Although alcohol was not absent in traditional Javanese *priyayi* life, it was present only in special occasions, such as in *tayuban* (Javanese social dance). Liquor was only part of an occasional daemonic festival and not a means to dull the pains of daily life troubles as in Jane's case. Running away to alcohol and drunkenness does not fit Kayam's conception in the early 1970s of a decent priyayi who champions self-control as a paramount principle.

### 2.2. "My Wife, Madame Schlitz and the Monster"

The story in "My Wife, Madame Schlitz and the Monster" is about the culture shock of a young Indonesian family – presumably based on the experience of Umar Kayam and his wife – living in a First World city. This newly arrived family rents a room in an apartment in New York City – a city that the narrator allegorizes as a hungry monster devouring humans of all races. The anonymous and individualist style of living in the American apartment – where nobody knows who lives next door – tortures Kayam and his wife but especially the narrator's wife. While the narrator, referred to by Madame Schlitz as 'H-Omar Kay-yammm'. is busy with his postgraduate study; his wife has to stay at home with no social contact with other human beings, except their toddler. The anonymity of the apartment life is portrayed in the inhabitants' daily routine:

> *Kami tinggal di tingkat lima. Dalam tingkat itu ada sepuluh apartemen. Tapi toh tingkat itu kelihatannya selalu sepi saja. Pagi-pagi kami mendengar sepatu-sepatu berdentam-dentam sebentar. Tapi dengan keriutnya lift mencapai tingkat kami, suara-suara sepatu-sepatu itu segera pula ditelan lift ke bawah. Pada sore hari sepatu-sepatu itu akan terdengar berdentam-dentam lagi, begitu keriut lift terdengar mencapai tingkat kami. Tapi dengan suara-suara kunti pintu dibuka, suara sepatu-sepatu itu kemudian juga lenyap di balik pintu* (Kayam 1986: 171).

> Our flat was on the fifth floor. It was one of ten apartments. The whole floor seemed deserted. We briefly heard shoes stamping about in the

> morning, but once the elevator rattled up, the shoes disappeared. In the late afternoon we heard the shoes again. Once the various keys were turned in their locks, the shoes vanished behind closed doors (Kayam 1980: 10).

Such neighbourhood anonymity is in contrast with her Indonesian experience. She misses her old habits: chatting with a neighbour next door and sharing cooking oil and sugar among neighbours. The kind of communality she used to find in Java is absent in New York and it tortures her. This sort of loneliness is unanticipated for them and this seems to be a common first impression for someone coming from a communal society who has to live in a Western metropolis. Sayyid Qutb is said to have felt the same when he first arrived in New York in 1948:

> When Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential Islamist thinkers of the last century, arrived in New York from his native Egypt in 1948, he felt miserable in the city, which appeared to him as a "huge workshop", "noisy" and "clamouring". Even the pigeons looked unhappy in the urban chaos (Buruma 2004: 31-32).

Monstrous, noisy, and clamouring are the attributes that both writers use to describe New York. The city's different cultural expectations of how one should relate to others stimulate this negative imagery: Kayam's characters and Qutb feel lonely in the middle of this busy but, for them, anonymous city.

In the story, Umar Kayam and his wife have been living in the apartment for 3 months without meeting a single neighbour when,

finally, they get a visitor from next door, Madame Schlitz. She happens to be another misplaced character. This Madame Schlitz lives by herself accompanied only by a Chihuahua named after her supposedly deceased husband, Erich. Her family name, Schlitz, is different from other common American family names that the narrator knows. This peculiar name, as well as her use of 'Madame' in front of her name, makes Kayam speculate that she may be a descendant of a European aristocrat, although he must have known that Schlitz was a popular beer brand in the US at the time: "According to my theory, Schlitz is an aristocratic name, descended from the Hapsburg dynasty or some such thing. Our neighbour is a baroness. Madame Baron von Schlitz" (Kayam 1980: 11). Kayam's speculation is strengthened by her strongly accented English that he reckons to be Austrian. Ironically, in the US of the time, so the story goes, aristocratic titles are only for the second-class citizens of the 1960s, the blacks, who have made their way upward by playing music: "only musicians and singers use aristocratic titles here. Negroes, like Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Earl Grant" (Kayam 1980: 11). The story suggests that to the narrator she is a symbol of those citizens who have been marginalized by Western modernity and desperately tries to retain her pride by adopting a pseudo aristocratic title.

Although Madame Schlitz has accustomed herself to what the East would call solitary life because it has been part of her culture, her attitudes indicate that she too is lonely. She compensates for her lack of human contact by initiating a new human contact with the narrator's family. This new social relation is built upon an imaginary identity that Madame Schlitz fabricates in two ways, namely her accented English and her married life. The narrator's wife finds this out when she overhears

her talking to her Chihuahua: "And what happened to Madame Schlitz's accent? The Austrian accent had vanished completely. Her voice was ordinary midtown Manhattan" (Kayam 1980: 6). However, Madame Schlitz's accent suddenly comes back when talking to Kayam's wife:

> "Aaaaah, Madame h-Omar Kay-yyammm! How h-are you? Come in, come in!"
> The accent was back…
> "Vot a pity you hav come ven I am zo busy"(Kayam 1980: 17).

Different from other English accents, such as Black English or Singaporean English that are usually acquired since childhood, the Austrian accent that Madame Schlitz adopts is learned from her supposedly deceased husband:

> "So, you are neither German nor Austrian?"
> No, no. My deah husband' vos h-Austrian. H-Iam vun hundred perzen h-American. My h-ancestorz hav been here zinz ze Mayflower."
> "But your accent is so strong …"
> Madame Schlitz smiled.
> "Ven h-a voman luvs her husban' az much az I luv mine, she vil become like him in every vay. She vil even speak like him. Do you luv your husban' like zat?"(Kayam 1980: 14).

That Madame Schlitz chooses to speak with Austrian dialect when talking to Mrs. Kayam needs explanation. It will not raise a question if, for example, she uses the accent when talking to other Austrian

Americans in order to get the message across more easily. But a better explanation for this choice of accent is because Madame Schlitz, like Charlie in "Chief Sitting Bull", lives in a fantasy world. This explanation is confirmed at the end of the story when the narrator's wife learns from the real estate agent that Madame Schlitz's husband is still alive and that she likes making up stories. This means that she feels her First World identity is not sufficient to build a social relation. This lack is probably because it has been so polluted with what Occidentalists would call Western selfish individualism. Ironically when she adopts her real Manhattan identity – that is when speaking with an ordinary midtown Manhattan accent – it is a Chihuahua that she gets along with. The hidden meaning of this irony is that the American value system is inadequate for this particular woman to enjoy proper human relations. Instead, she must adopt another value system in order to have them. This implication of the inadequacy of the West is also reflected in Madame Schlitz's obsession with yoga. She feels that her sickness will be best treated by practising yoga, an Eastern activity. This signifies that she does not believe in the Western system of treatment and prefers instead this Eastern spiritual and physical exercise.

Madame Schlitz's view of yoga and the East is typically Orientalist. She has never been there and yet she has a vivid picture of what it should look like, including the idea that all Easterners practise yoga. The East as imagined by Madame Schlitz does not necessarily correlate with reality because the so-called Orient has been constructed in the West under the influence of various vested interests of the kind described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. For Madame Schlitz, whether or not the East is actually like what she has been imagining does not really matter

as long as it serves her purpose. If in colonialist discourse the purpose of Orientalism had been to decipher and to conquer, in Kayam's story it enables Madame Schlitz to turn from the inadequacy of Western values and seek in hope to find health and happiness through Eastern values (e.g., her belief that her ulcer will be healed by practising yoga).

### 2.3. "Sybil"

In Kayam's Manhattan stories, materialism is manifested in different ways in the characters' strong attachment to money. The intensity of this money attachment may be said to have reached the level in some characters where money has been fetishized. Money, which was initially conceived of as the symbol of goods in an economic exchange, has come to be seen as having its own value and is used to manipulate social relations.[3] In "Sybil" the fetishism of money is portrayed in two ways. The first can be seen in how motherly love is mediated by money and the second in the portrayal of the exploitation of a working class woman, Sybil's mother, by the capitalist owner of a restaurant.

Sybil and her mother hardly get along well. The morning mother-daughter chit-chat routine is rampant with swear words, such as *dungu* (dumb), *anak sial* (cursed child), and t*utup mulutmu setan* (shut up your mouth devil) that Sybil has to take for neglecting her chores. The only motherly love Sybil receives every day is in the form of a one dollar note

---

[3] In an article "Commodity Fetishism" (1987: 739) Arthur Ripstein argues that social relations between people becomes perceived as relations between things mainly because people take commodities to have value in their own right. He adds that this fetishism "comes not from the sense in which it is false, but from the sense in which it is true."

for her lunch. Sybil's mother also uses money to cover up her 'indecent' way of life; she gets rid of Sybil by giving her money to go to the movie. That way the mother can have the whole apartment for herself and her boss, Harry:

> *He, aku ada pikiran. Kenapa kau tidak pergi nonton ke Strand. Aku lihat lakonnya bagus. The Curse of the Werewolf. Pergilah dan ceritakanlah nanti malam padaku. Ini uang sedolar* (Kayam 1986: 206-207).
>
> I've got an idea! Why don't you go and take in the movie at the Strand? It looks exciting. *The Curse of the Werewolf*. Brrrrr. Come back and tell me about it tonight. Here's a dollar (Kayam 1980: 32).

However, such a cover-up is just too apparent for a 15-year old girl; clearly readers are intended to pick up on the irony of Sybil's question to Harry: "Are you taking your nap in the afternoon now?" (Kayam 1980: 32).

Sybil's neighbour, Mrs. Johnson, seems to rely on the same pattern when it comes to raising her daughter. This can be seen when she gives Sybil three dollars in exchange for Sybil's taking care of Susan, her six-year-old daughter while she is away. With that money, Mrs. Johnson entrusts Susan to her – and yet she does not care whether or not Sybil will take her to places that may not be suitable for a child of her age: "Take her any place you like. The park, the river, the movies, anywhere" (Kayam 1980: 26). This pattern of money-mediated relationships is beyond the economic use and is very crucial in maintaining both familial and social cohesion.

The second aspect of materialism that "Sybil" embodies is depicted through Sybil's mother's dependence on Harry Robertson, her employer. Despite the fact that by working for Harry's restaurant she can barely make ends meet, she does not have any other option but to keep working at the same place. More than that, this need for money has also led her to become the sexual plaything of her employer. Sybil's mother suffers sexual exploitation in order to stay in the job. There is no indication that she benefits financially other than staying in employment.

While materialism for a member of the working class like Sybil's mother has become a futile pursuit for material fulfilment characterized by rush, sexual exploitation, and unaffordable basic life needs; for a capital owner like Harry Robertson, materialism and capitalism have provided an opportunity for sexual gratification. Hence, the America in the story is also characterized by an associated suggestion of promiscuity facilitated by its capitalist system: Harry Robertson often drops by in daytime just to have sex with his employee, Sybil's mother. This is done during the office hours probably because Harry is married and he wants his family to think that he is working while actually he is exploiting his worker sexually. Kayam's observation of this commodity fetishism pictured in "Sybil" and the next two stories, "Secangkir Kopi dan Sepotong Donat" and "Chief Sitting Bull", provides a contrast for his exploration of *priyayi* values in his *priyayi* novels and is perhaps an inspiration for the description of corrupt modern *priyayi* by materialism.

### 2.4. "A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut"

The fragility of characters in a family life is reflected in the next short story, "A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut". On the surface, the story set in

a busy coffee shop is about a written communicative exchange between two young lovers. The boy – referred to as *si burung kakaktua* (the cockatoo) – is wondering why Peggy, his girlfriend working in the coffee shop, did not show up the night before as promised. They write their words on a paper napkin that they hurriedly swap to each other while Peggy is busy serving the other customers in the coffee shop.

The boy curiously asks, "Peggy, darling. Why did you stand me up last night? I couldn't sleep a wink." Initially Peggy does not take the question seriously and Kayam creates a humorous situation when Peggy responds, "Buy some sleeping-pills from Doris at the drug-store." Peggy seems reluctant to tell him the real reason of her absence, but the cockatoo boy insists on getting the answer, presumably out of jealousy. Toward the end of the story finally Peggy informs him that her dad was drunk the night before and beat her mom: "My father was drunk again. He beat up my old lady" (Kayam 1980: 40).

Peggy's answer comes as a surprise for the boy and the readers as well. With this revelation, Kayam goes one step further on from "A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan" in representing what alcohol can do to families. In "A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut" Kayam represents, in an effective indirect fashion, that drunkenness doesn't just dull pain but also has other more serious consequences, in this case domestic violence. Kayam clearly relates this alcohol to the domestic violence that he sees as a component of working class life in the US. Kayam's ability to depict this fragile and tense American family relation in such a short narrative shows his sense of the gaps of understanding between cultures, especially if compared to his depiction of the agrarian Javanese peasant and *priyayi* family's cohesion in his later stories.

### 2.5. "Chief Sitting Bull"

Another story depicting how familial and social cohesion are mediated by money is "Chief Sitting Bull". This short story shows how a retired old man, Charlie, spends his days. After having breakfast prepared by his daughter-in-law, he always goes to a park to ride a carousel. Charlie's evaluation of his daughter in-law's care is measured by whether or not she forgets to leave a dollar note on the kitchen table for his daily excursion, as seen from the following dialogue between Charlie and the ticket seller:

> *"Kau lambat hari ini Charlie."*
> *"Ya. Mary, menantuku tidak beres pagi ini."*
> *"Tidak beres bagaimana?"*
> *"Masa dia lupa menaruh jatahku yang $ 1, itu di meja dapur"* (Kayam 1986: 222).

> "You're late today, Charlie."
> "Yes. Mary -- my daughter-in-law -- messed things up."
> "How?"
> "She forgot to leave my dollar on the kitchen table"(Kayam 1980: 42).

In fact, his relation with the world of fantasy is also mediated by money:

> *Waktu sampai di muka loket dengan napas sengal-sengal diberikannya uang lima puluh sen kepada perempuan yang menjual*

*karcis.*

*"Lima seperti biasa, Charlie"*(Kayam 1986: 221).

When he reached the ticket box he gave fifty cents to the woman....

"Five, as usual, Charlie?" (Kayam 1980: 42).

The world of fantasy here is symbolized by the carousel and the dummy white horse that Charlie always rides while pretending to be Sitting Bull, a native American hero. This dummy white horse is Charlie's favourite and he will never ride other dummy horses.

Running away from loneliness to the world of absurd fantasy – riding the carousel and his obsession with the dummy white horse – is Charlie's strategy to cope with his loneliness. In fact, this is not the only way. Charlie has been developing a world of fantasy even in his daily life. Despite Charlie's confession that he has been treated unfairly by his daughter-in-law, Mary, the text itself seems to question his version of the story. Charlie mentions that Mary burns the toast prepared for him and pretends to forget 'his allowance' that she has to give him every morning for riding the carousel. In the end of the story, however, the narrator shows how patient and understanding Mary is toward her father-in-law. Even when she knows that he is making up stories by telling Mary that he has been to the library and met some old friends to discuss politics, she just pretends that she believes him in order to not offend his dignity. This is another fantasy world that Charlie has been developing to give an impression to others that he is still important and well-connected. His daughter-in-law's kindness is not sufficient to fill Charlie's desolation at living in a materialist and individualist world: he needs to go to these

fantasy worlds of his own to keep his self-respect.

"Chief Sitting Bull" shows Kayam's perceptive observation of an aspect of American life as represented by Charlie. The story shows that the First World with its capitalist system, materialism and individualism not only generates loneliness but also commodifies loneliness so those afflicted have to pay to relieve it. This commodification is symbolized by Charlie who pays 50 cents every day for his imaginary horse ride. This commodification of human suffering indicates that in such a system any aspect of human life can be profit generating.

### 2.6. "There Goes Tatum"

The only short story in Kayam's collection that deals with the issue of racism in a more direct fashion is "There Goes Tatum." It is a story of an Indonesian student studying at the New York University in the 1960s. On his way to campus, he is mugged by a black man with a thick black accent demanding money: "Fifty cents, mistuh." At that time 50 cents would suffice to buy a big sandwich and that is the amount that the black thug asks from the narrator. Before finally giving him what he asks, the narrator tries to "play him along a little" (Kayam 1980: 50). It is during this interchange that the narrator realizes that he does not, as he perhaps thought he might, belong to the same alienated social group as the robber. His identification with coloured people in order to save himself from the robbery is repudiated.

> *"Tunggu dulu. Bukankah ada semacam kode tidak ada perampokan antara sesama kulit berwarna?"*
>
> *"Ya, aku pernah dengar kode itu"*

*"Nah, bukankah aku kulit berwarna juga?"*
*"Tuan kulit berwarna?* Don't be so funny! *Aku kulit berwarna. Tatum, kulit berwarna.* Pepe, *kulit berwarna,* Pedro, *kulit berwarna. Tapi Tuan?"*
....
*"Tuan bukan orang kulit berwarna! Tanyalah kepada gubernur-gubernur di Selatan. Pastilah Tuan boleh kencing di WC Tuan-tuan itu"* (Kayam 1986: 238-39).

"Hey, hold on. Isn't there some kind of code that coloured people never rob each other?"
"I think I've heard of it."
"Well, I'm coloured, aren't I?"
"You? Don't be funny. I'm coloured. Tatum's coloured. So are Pepe and Pedro. But you?
.....
"You're not coloured. Ask any of the governors down South. They'd let you piss in their johns"(Kayam 1980: 53).

'Coloured people' in this black man's understanding does not merely signify racial identity and social class. For him, coloured means Black or Hispanic. Although the narrator is a Javanese Indonesian and hence coloured, he does not belong to the coloured because he does not come from the same historical trajectory. People like him are allowed to "piss in the governors' johns" while the 'true' coloured cannot. He can use any facility designated for the whites whereas the coloured cannot. This reflects Kayam's puzzlement at his position as a Javanese in relation to

the racial discrimination still so common in the States in the 1970s. His *sawo matang*, brown skin, doesn't appear to be enough to make him part of the category of 'coloured' (that he is well-dressed perhaps also helps to exclude him from being seen like this, of course). His position as represented in the story is in fact in between the coloured and the white. His positioning precisely undermines the discourse of racism, not just the US black versus white, but also 'white' *priyayi* versus 'darker' underclasses in traditional Javanese society.

This incident can also be read as Kayam's critique of the race categorization that was the basis of segregation in America. Through this story Kayam shows that even within the coloured group the reality is heterogeneous. As Fanon once said, although both Africans and the African Americans are blacks they have different historical trajectories and therefore pose different issues of post-coloniality.

Although in America the narrator identifies himself with the blacks, back in Indonesia the narrator is a *priyayi*, a member of an elite Javanese class (or at least what used to be an elite class). His identification with coloured people therefore might be read as a sign of a domestic reality where the gap between the *priyayi* class and the peasant is getting irrelevant, although in colonial Indonesia the Javanese *priyayi* is an instrument of a colonial machine functioning as a hub between the Dutch and the peasants. Kayam deliberately picks on the ambivalences of the race/color/class debates in this story because they parallel, in perhaps an even more obvious way, the issues about the relation between birth and power that he investigates in his later fictions.

## 3. Conclusion

Through the figuration of the American characters in his stories, Kayam is reflecting on American society and his own culture. The characters' responses to Western modernity vary from seeking refuge in their fantasy world to alcoholic drunkenness, domestic violence, and even criminal actions. These responses are portrayed as the dark side of capitalism, materialism, and individualism. Most of the characters are described as psychologically lonely and financially constrained. It seems that for Kayam at this period, the first world cultural system poses more moral dangers than the agrarian third world system.

From Kayam's Eastern perspective, the evils plaguing the characters he depicts may be due to capitalism and individualism. The stories describe the side effects of such a system as being disastrous: loneliness, fragile families, loss of social cohesion and crime. The conditions that he witnessed himself in his period of living overseas may have stimulated Kayam to reflect on his own society in particular ways and indeed in his later fictions I argue that the perceptiveness of his representation of the postcolonial fate of the *priyayi* is aided by his ability to stand outside the painful debates taking place in post-independence Indonesia. The struggle of subaltern people for social mobility and social justice becomes the main theme of his *priyayi* stories. His subsequent works are an attempt to understand his own society of origin, Javanese society, and of the place within it of the Javanese elite. It may be no coincidence that Clifford Geertz's magnum opus, The *Religion of Java*, was published in 1960, thus providing Kayam with a clear theoretical framework for his reflection in his later works, although Kayam's response is in effect a

'writing back' against Geertz.

**References**

Aveling, Harry. 2005. "A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan: Translation in the Short Stories of Umar Kayam." *CELT, 5* (2): 87-97.

Buruma, Ian. 2004. *Occidentalism*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Faruk. 1998. "Seni, Umar Kayam, Dan Jaring Semiotik." *Umar Kayam Dan Jaring Semiotik*. Ed. Salam, Aprinus. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

Kayam, Umar. 1980. *Sri Sumarah and Other Stories*. Trans. Aveling, Harry. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational books (Asia) Ltd.

____. 1986. *Sri Sumarah Dan Cerita Pendek Lainnya*. Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya.

Kleden, Ignas. 1998. "Novel Dan Cerpen-Cerpen Umar Kayam: Strategi Literer Menghadapi Perubahan Sosial." *Umar Kayam Dan Jaring Semiotik* Ed. Salam, Aprinus. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

Ripstein, Arthur. 1987. "Commodity Fetishism." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* 17 (4): 733-48.

Submitted: November 11, 2017
Reviewed: January 3, 2018
Accepted: January 10, 2018